

# Physical Actor Training

*If, as an actor, your body is your 'instrument', what happens when the 'psychophysical' body-mind connection is lost?*

Andrei Droznin, Russia's foremost teacher of physical actor training, calls this loss the 'desomatisation' of the human body, and argues that this connection urgently needs to be restored for the actor to reach his or her expressive potential.

*Physical Actor Training* is a unique volume by a man who has worked at the very top of Russian theatre; a movement specialist who has taught at the Moscow Art Theatre as well as drama schools all over the world. Seamlessly linking theory and practice, it will excite and inspire a new generation of English-language readers.

**Andrei Droznin** was among the founding members of the Tabakov Studio in Moscow and the Stanislavsky Summer School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In addition to serving as Professor of Stage Movement at the MXAT School and the Vakhtangov Theatre Institute in Moscow, Droznin has taught in the Institute of Advanced Theater Training at the American Repertory Theatre in Harvard and Carnegie-Mellon University (USA) and directed movement in more than 140 theatre productions and movies in the former Soviet Union and abroad.

**Natalia Fedorova** has taught with Andrei Droznin at the Vakhtangov Theatre Institute, the Moscow Art Theatre School in Russia and in Stanislavsky Summer School in the USA. She was his graduate student, and long-term assistant. Natalia currently teaches Droznin's method of stage movement in the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Rose Bruford College in London.



## Several words about Andrey Droznin and his book

The first impression of Andrey Droznin is impossible to forget. This happened in the middle of 1970s, when Jerzy Grotowski came to the editorial office of *Teatr* magazine to meet with the leading masters of the Soviet stage, as they used to say at that time. The masters were all there. Grotowski was talking for a long time, on his own, about the things that were well known from Russian theatre history but had disappeared without a trace. It was half-confession and half-sermon. His speech was enchanting and frightening. There was some sense of shame and awkwardness: the Polish director was preaching the ideas, which were born in Russia but well forgotten. Naturally, his speech was in Polish, but there was no sense of translation. The man standing next to Grotowski – skinny and graceful, with a small pointed beard – looked like Aramis from *Three Musketeers*. He did not simply translate his friend from one language into another. He translated one soul into another if I can say so. He did not convey Grotowski's words but his ideas, with such a subtlety and expressiveness that revealed the translator's own direction of intelligence. It was clear that this 'Aramis' had his own intimate, deeply professional attitude towards the subject of discussion. It seemed that they were confessing *a due voci*. I have never heard such theatre translation again.

That 'Aramis' was Andrey Droznin. He was born in pre-Soviet Lvov and spoke only Polish for the first years of his life. It turned out than he had a degree in engineering but dropped his profession (of a bridge-builder, I think) and was working in theatre and teaching in Schukin drama school. In a while Moscow saw his show *Mowgli* in the Tabakov Studio (he was not only a movement director but co-directed the show with Konstantin Raykin). It became clear that in Moscow, or rather in Russia, appeared a man who is destined to change the very concept of 'scenic movement'.

The traditionally second-rate discipline in a drama school curriculum gave Droznin a reason to contemplate the fundamental issues of theatre practice. He interpreted the problem of 'scenic movement' in the widest context of the body-soul relationship in the creating artist. With his fanatical attention to details he developed his *idée-fixe*, which is obvious in its main message. Who does not know that body and soul are mysteriously related, and there is nothing in the soul that cannot be expressed through the body, and vice versa?



Everyone knows this but in the reality of our drama schools and theatre in general the most complex unity of body and soul of an actor was divided into two unequal parts. The wrongly understood Stanislavski was triggering such division. At that time, psychotechnique ('experiencing') became the main subject of acting, and scenic movement turned into a complementary discipline. The army of 'psychological experiencers' (as Meyerhold ironically nicknamed them) celebrated their victory.

Andrey Droznin appeared when Meyerhold, Tairov, Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov were partially rehabilitated (at least it became possible to discuss Stanislavski's ideas in the context of the theatrical directions he opposed). When Droznin started, the people had already heard about Peter Brook, Grotowski and Brecht. When 'Stanislavski's loneliness', artificially created by having removed his major opponents from life, became the fact of degradation of the Moscow Art Theatre school, Droznin spent his life proving the harmfulness of approaching an actor's psyche and physicality separately. 'Scenic movement' has shifted from the marginal position into the centre of practical mastering of acting. It has happened in front of my eyes, not at once, but over a quarter of a century. Droznin played one of the leading parts in that recovery of Russian theatre education.

Every day and all his life Droznin has been immersed in practical work – in the Schukin Theatre Institute, in the international programmes of the Moscow Art Theatre School, in his endless workshops all over the world. Having gathered huge experience, and not worrying the slightest about copyright, he allowed any curious foreigner to write down his classes and make note of his exercises of which he collected hundreds and thousands (no one ever counted!). He had no time to formulate his ideas and secure his copyright in writing. For many years he has been telling his friends about the book he was writing and soon would be ready to show to the world. It seemed that the book would never be finished. 'Aramis' kept his word. You are holding the promised book in your hands. It is not a simple book; it is only the first part of it, the philosophy of the subject. Andrey Droznin promises us a second volume that will include all his inventions and exercises. This is the systemic presentation of a discipline, to which Droznin dedicated several decades of his life.

Probably some practitioners will put the first volume of the Droznin's book aside and will wait for the second one, for 'inventions'. I would encourage them to read the first volume. Without it, Droznin's inventions have no internal justification. It is similar to doing yoga without understanding the cultural system and spiritual references that brought it to the world. I would like to repeat: in Droznin we are dealing not only with a practitioner but also with an ideologist in his profession. Perhaps, many things in his ideology will be questioned. His digressions in theatre history will provoke objections. This is normal – the book is intended to provoke a discussion.

Whilst recalling Grotowski's time in Moscow in 1970s, Droznin told me one episode of communication between the Polish guru and his Russian colleagues. One of them asked the new visionary what exactly he wanted



to achieve. Grotowski answered with a strange phrase, and Droznin translated it equally strangely, 'incorrectly' but keeping the exact meaning: 'I want to become perception'.

If someone asks Andrey Droznin the same question now, his answer would probably be just as incorrect: I want to become *movement*. The 'correct' translation into the language of the theatrical ideology would be *movement full of spirit*.

Anatoly Smeliansky



# Preface

The book I am proposing to my readers began as 'notes on the go': separate observations and thoughts written down on hundreds of pocket-friendly pieces of paper during my countless transitions through Moscow, and exclusively for my own use. When these notes, sorted by subjects and placed or rather stuffed into separate envelopes, had filled the big drawer of my desk and started to bulge out like dough out of a bowl, a secret thought to organise them into a book came to me. I envisioned a 'Scenic Movement' textbook. But thoughts can come and go, and sometimes hibernate ...

In 1990, the newly conceived *Anima* magazine took an interest in these notes and commissioned me to write a series of articles about the body-soul relationship in acting. A number of these were collected and edited 'for external use' but the magazine itself never saw the light of day. These unclaimed articles became the basis for lectures, which I began to give at the *Theatre Union* seminars and to my students in the Schukin Theatre Institute. Gradually I began to adapt further notes for external use. My work abroad brought me new information, new problems, new thoughts and ideas, and with that, new notes were created. My lectures had expanded, and I began to give them to my students in the Institute for Advance Theatre Training at Harvard University. The lectures started turning into something coherent. The outline of the book became visible – a practical study guide, in which theoretical contemplation would play only a supportive part.

However, in the course of writing it, this book has become increasingly theoretical while the practical material has been relegated farther and farther into the background. I must therefore apologise to everyone who knows me as a practitioner and expects a practical workbook from me. Ludwik Flaszen, a dramaturge for Jerzy Grotowski Laboratory theatre, once said: 'A Man writes a Book, and a Book writes a Man'. I have decided not to resist the Force that is guiding my hand and so in order to free myself from the ideas in modern movement philosophy that I find disturbing, I will finish this book the way it is coming out and then will write another purely practical manual to accompany it.

However, without this book the second one will not make much sense. There are already plenty of exercises to develop the human body, by many teachers, well known and nameless. However, the result – the actor's physicality – is



far from the ideal. I believe this is due to the fact that we have overlooked something important from the legacy of our predecessors. In order to change the situation, we have to take time to clarify a seemingly simple matter: what is the function of the actor's body in his training and professional work? While searching for the answer, we inevitably face a broader question: what is the relationship between the body, which we are trying to train, and the soul, whose life the body is called to express?

My reasoning is based on the concept of an absolute unity of body and soul, and rejects the idea of their separate existence, which we inherited from the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

However, their inseparability does not mean that we cannot **single out** one of the components of this indivisible unity for learning and training purposes. No one would use the idea of psychophysical wholeness of humans to object to the fact that reading books strengthens the mind, just like regular visits to the gym strengthen the body. In my search for answers to the questions that disturb my thinking I take the liberty of being an advocate of corporeality. However, I want to state from the very beginning that although I have singled out corporeality and have been clearing out the pile of issues around it for a long time, **I always remember that second, higher component of a human being, and unconditionally accept the primary importance, or rather the leading role of the soul in human life, and especially in creative work.**

I am asking the Esteemed Reader to strongly register the previous phrase so that during the further reading of the book they are not confused with suspicions about my preferences in art when on every page they bump into the assertions of importance of physicality in an actor's work.

During my 40 years working in theatre I kept encountering the situation of the 'earthly' body not letting the 'heavenly' soul express itself. To quote the Polish comic writer Stanisław Jerzy Lec, 'A thought came to his head, found no one there and left'. Thousands of times I observed the mentally constructed, psychologically and literary sublime elements of the character's internal world disappearing when it was time to embody them in the external objective space, in which the actor's 'earthly' body has to exist.

It was happening for two reasons:

- 1 The body was physically unprepared to perform the idea.
- 2 The 'body-soul' connection was lost.

It is impossible to overcome these obstacles simply by sticking to mantras like 'as soon as the inner life of your character is correct ...'. This is the only reason why I fiercely defend the importance of corporeality in acting. So much has



been written about the spiritual aspect of creativity that its position in art is solid in the public consciousness and the notions of 'creator' and 'spirit' are forever united in the concept of 'creative spirit'.

Those readers who share a more complex vision of a human, which is an attribute of religious thinking, must forgive me: they single out a body, a soul and a spirit, or even more complex: 'there is a spiritual side or level of life, there is a soul/spiritual one, a purely spiritual side, a soul/body side and a pure bodily one'.<sup>1</sup> I do not feel competent enough to discuss such serious a matter and am in no position to correct those theatrical founding fathers who use both terms, 'soul' and 'spirit', in a quite arbitrary manner, even Michael Chekhov, who insisted that 'we, the artists have to accept the concept of a three-part man, who has a body, a soul, and a spirit'.<sup>2</sup> Stanislavski did not have a clear stand in this matter. Just like a majority of other theatre writers, he most frequently used a simplified division and terminology 'body and soul', to which contemporary ears are more accustomed.

Please, forgive my repeated highlighting of some words or lines in this book. This by no means comes from lack of confidence in my readers and their ability to single out the important parts. Partly this is left over from the origins of this book as lecture notes where the highlighting indicates where vocal emphasis was needed, and partly a result of my shortcomings as a writer. It is not my reader but myself that cannot do without underlining, which acts like a 'scaffolding' in helping me to deliver my thoughts with maximum precision.

However, I will be honest: to some extent my highlighting is provoked by the amazing ability of theatre people to not notice the technical aspect of acting, especially the issues of the actor's external technique, the functions of his physical apparatus.

I must also ask the reader to look past the excessive number of citations and quotations. I am invading a domain so well developed by my predecessors that it is a sin not to quote them; whilst conversely, so much is being forgotten that it is a sin not to recall. Our predecessors left behind many wise books, but now we read too quickly, and only skim the famous canonised texts without actually delving into them. And if we do look at them, we usually see what we are familiar with or expected to see, and therefore miss some important or unfamiliar statements. Besides, I wanted to collect as many different points of view as possible in order to give the fullest outline of the problem.

This book was written mainly to identify the problems of an actor's corporeality, to draw the attention of theatrical community to them, and to ask questions. I will not take the liberty of giving answers and recommendations; I would only like to express my opinion. To be honest with you, it will be nice to know that someone shares it, but I will be a hundred times more pleased if I manage to infect someone with my ideas. Those with different views would probably be interested in debating with me.

It is no secret that this book was written by an advocate of the Stanislavski System. However, there were many questions left after Stanislavski about specific theatrical forms, without which no art could exist. And the answers given by Stanislavski's followers often contradict the logic of the System and the



laws of art. It worries me, and for this reason I have to be so meticulous and overcritical in addressing the simplest questions all over again.

My love for Stanislavski does not diminish my admiration for the greatness of Meyerhold, who supplied me with answers to some of my questions. It reinforced my conviction that the wellbeing of contemporary theatre is impossible without incorporating the legacy of Meyerhold and other theatre directors-reformers of the early twentieth century. Theatre critics and directors realised this a long time ago but drama schools continue to create a distorted model of theatre, its lopsided image.

I have to admit that I look at both Stanislavski and Meyerhold through the eyes of their student Yevgeny Vakhtangov, mainly because he found the way to understand both of his very different teachers and to follow each of them without betraying either; because he was unrivalled in balancing between 'truth of life', of which Stanislavski was a deep believer, and 'truth of theatre', of which Meyerhold was a brilliant master.

This book was created for actors but may well be of interest also to those not involved in theatre. We are all actors on the stage of life, and our destiny largely depends on how efficient and adequate we are in the physical fulfilment of our dreams, plans, wishes; how well we can express these through our bodies so that others can understand us; how easily we can communicate with other people using our body positions, gestures and touches in order to be accepted.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me to become what I am today, and thus influenced me to write this book. The length of the whole book is not enough to list them all but I must name some of them.

The modern pandemic of forgetfulness has become overwhelming for me and I find myself bewildered by it in the same way an animal psychologist must sometimes feel when observing the behaviour of dumb animals – the same way I feel when I look at some of my former students: actors, directors and teachers who are genuinely convinced that theatre began from their entrance onto the world stage. As if, before their arrival, theatre was just an arid desert with only a few sickly and stunted weeds (Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Tairov and the like) sprouting here and there. If you believe these former students, they learned their craft on their own; they are products not even of an immaculate conception but rather autogenesis! Growing up far from any nurturing influence, remembering their teachers only at their memorial services, or when speaking condescendingly about those still living. At least they still initiate a handshake!

A little digression. There will be many of them in the book. Sometimes they appear in the course of work on a text, but most of them are later comments to the earlier writing or references to new information clarifying or reinforcing the main idea. I don't mind if my reader chooses to skip them.



Paris. The Conservatoire. I am teaching a workshop. The assistant teacher of masque asks me for permission to watch my lesson. Afterwards I ask her about the method she is teaching, how she studied it and where she hopes to go with it. She replies that her teacher, professor Mario Gonzalez, shadowed his teacher Jaques Lecoq learning the masque technique from him, then studying with Ariane Mnouchkine for just as long, and after that he worked out his own method based on the techniques of his teachers. And that she hopes that over time she would as well ... her words reminded me of a fellow professor of Harvard University, Margaret Eginton, who proudly stated that she was teaching bioenergetics by Alexander Lowen, who developed some of the ideas of his teacher Wilhelm Reich, who, in his turn, grew up on the ideas of Sigmund Freud ...

The endless branches of biblical forefathers and descendants immediately emerged in my subconscious connecting generations in one bloodline.

Good Lord, why are we so forgetful of those who bred us?

Thus, my guiding figures, my landmarks on the map of life (the reader may skip these lines too!): often some of these people became my teachers without knowing it. Others served as my compass helping to identify the right direction, or lent me their shoulder in hour of need, or even became 'life changing figures'.

First of all, these are professors of the Lviv Polytechnical University: Prof. Polyansky (technical drawings), Prof. Kirnikyevich (perspective geometry) and Prof. Tadey Schubert (Chair of Highways Department). They were graduates from universities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Lviv became Soviet in 1939) and high-class professionals; you would not find their likes today. Their professionalism was overwhelming to the point of oppression but they instilled in me infinite and abiding respect for professionalism, which I took with me into whatever work I was doing, for the rest of my life.

Zosima Zlobin, who taught biomechanics in Meyerhold's workshops and spent 17 years in Stalin labour camps without losing his creative zeal and cat-like grace: after release from the camp and rehabilitation he was teaching physical training in one of the first Russian mime theatres, Ektemim. It was on his advice that I made the move into movement as a profession, while I was merely an enthusiast of jazz dance, mime and free movement, and still only a graduate of the Civil Engineering department (in 1962) daring to teach movement in experimental amateur theatre.

Alexander Orlov, VGIK graduate and Ektemim actor who took on the running of the theatre after Rumnev's death: Alexander made me, a successful engineer occasionally satisfying his cravings in amateur theatres, give up everything, go to



moscow and follow my calling (in 1977). He was the first person to get me work as a movement director in a professional theatre. He also drew me into reading professional literature, something almost unavailable at that time.

Galina Morozova, LGITMIK graduate and a former student of Ivan Kokh, who preserved reverent love for her former teacher: she was a brilliant movement and fencing coach, erudite theoretician and researcher. While others reacted with painful resentment at the neophyte enthusiasm I displayed in bursting into the well-shaped rows of movement teachers, Morozova lent me a hand of human and professional friendship, which became my strongest support. She drew me into theory and was my first consultant and adviser when I began writing.

Vladimir Eufer, a director and a teacher in the Vakhtangov Theatre Institute, was the one who talked me, at the time a theatrical impostor without a diploma and an unauthorised movement director in numerous Soviet Theatres, into legalising my theatre work by studying in the Schukin Theatre Institute. I started my first year on the directing course in 1973 and was immediately invited to teach movement on the acting course where I have been teaching ever since. The school has become my second home, and my testing ground for ideas I have gathered during my time at other institutions.

My teachers and colleagues at the Schukin school, who passed to me their knowledge, skills and experience, directly or indirectly: Boris Zakhava, Yury Katin-Yartsev, Vladimir Shlezinger, Dina Andreeva, Vera Lvova, Tatiana Shukhmina, Marina Sinelnikova, Marianna Ter-Zakharova, Albert Burov.

Vladimir Poglazov (nicknamed *Omen nomen* – sharp-eyed man), an actor in the Sovremennik Theatre and an acting teacher in the Schukin School: he saw something in my classes (or in me?) and in 1974 recommended me, half-student/half-teacher with a passion for movement, to Oleg Tabakov. Tabakov was looking for a movement teacher at his new studio, and this position dramatically changed my life.

Oleg Tabakov, a nationally acclaimed actor and the darling of our country, did not rest on his laurels: dissatisfied with the situation in theatre at that time, especially the vocal and physical training of an actor, he decided to create a children's theatre studio. He entrusted me, a movement specialist known to just a few, to deliver physical training to his students giving me the possibilities to search, experiment and gain unique experiences that before then I could only dream about.

It was whilst at Tabakov's Studio that I happily collaborated with Konstantin Raikin (special thanks to him!) on *Mowgli*, the best show of my life. It brought me my first theatre 'award' – the nickname 'Movement Fanatic'.

Anatoly Smeliansky appeared in my life 40 years ago and has stayed there all those years. I always admired and was envious of his ability to think big but with truthful subtle details, and was thus inspired to develop my own thinking of this kind.

Victor Monyukov, Chair of Actor's Preparation and Practice at the Moscow Art Theatre School, a born teacher, theatre theorist and practitioner:



he invited me to teach at the school, which was then the 'Stanislavski System' (1980). It was this experience that first gave me the right to feel included, and I still feel it 25 years later.

Theatre directors with whom I collaborated as an unknown movement specialist and from whom I learned a lot: Anatoly Efros, Valentin Pluchek, Mark Zakharov, Alexey Borodin, Mikhail Levitin, Boris Naravtsevich and many others.

Prof. Heinz Schlage, Dean of the Theatre Department in the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hannover (University of Music and Theatre Hanover) and Rolf Nagel from Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg, who dragged me through the 'Window to Europe' cracked open at the beginning of perestroika: this gave me the chance to compare my work and experience against those of the certified Western specialists, and to evaluate the skills and knowledge I had collected bit by bit. This encounter with so different a theatrical and social environment and its altogether alien mentality not only became a strong incentive for the next leap in my own search but also shook my pedagogical routine. I no longer relied on my established teaching techniques, instead moving into a more systematic re-evaluation of my own experiences.

Jerzy Grotowski, a cult director-innovator of the 1960s–80s and a known mythicised figure: I used my knowledge of Polish to voraciously read his articles about the Actor-Saint and actors' physical training, and later began to translate them into Russian at the request of an amazing woman, Yelena Khodunova. An enthusiastic fan of Grotowski, she worked for the Theatre Union of Russia and spread Grotowski's articles among 'trusted people'. These articles, then his books and finally meeting Grotowski in person – first in Moscow, during the theatre symposium in 1976, where I was his personal interpreter, and then in 1989 in Modena, Italy, participating in the conference dedicated to Grotowski's legacy ... or, to a greater degree the very existence of this man and his incredibly intense and selfless creative life have all thrilled my mind, made me suffer from my own lack of accomplishment, encouraged me to grow professionally all the time and prevented me from sinking into deadening technicality. I borrowed only a few things from him directly but without him I would have been a hundredfold poorer.

Finally, a thank you to all my students, graduate and undergraduate, talented and troubled, hard-working and carefree. Interaction with them formed me as a teacher. If they had been different I would have been different.

Especially I would like to mention Andrey Schukin, my former student and now my colleague, who has been lending me his shoulder every time I have needed it for over 20 years. Thanks to him for that and for not letting me relax and rest.

I owe a deep bow of gratitude to all the above-mentioned and to many not mentioned.

As for this book, I would like to thank my nephew Andrey Droznin Jr who participated in the every stage of creating it.